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ABSTRACT

The choice of an academic career was investigated with 671 full-time faculty members at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Faculty respondents indicated their departmental and school affiliation, the point in their educational development at which they decided on a college faculty career, their age at the time of that decision, and whether the decision to pursue an academic career came before or after the decision to focus on a discipline or specialty. It was found that the major of respondents made the decision to become a faculty member after completing college: 40% made the decision while in graduate school, and 27% made it after graduate school. Only 15% decided during their undergraduate years, with the remaining 8% deciding either in high school or between undergraduate and graduate school. Faculty in the humanities and sciences tended to make the decision earlier in their educational careers, while those in the health sciences professions tended to make it later. An additional finding was that the decision to enter academic life is heavily influenced by positive teaching experiences and by positive role models and mentors. 9 references. (SW)

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To Be or Not To Be: When and Why Faculty Decide to be Faculty

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"What factors played an important role in your decision to enter into the academic profession?"

This question, along with questions pertaining to the time at which faculty make the decision to enter academia, has received surprisingly little attention in the higher education literature. The answers to these questions, however, are vitally important in understanding why people are attracted to an academic career, especially at a time when current literature points to a potential shortage of faculty beginning about 1990 (e.g., Bowen and Schuster, 1986) when current faculty across the country will begin to retire. In the past few years there has been increasing interest in the study of faculty career development (e.g. Baldwin, 1979; Bieber, Lawrence and Blackburn, 1987; Blackburn 1985; Cytrynbaum, Lee and Wadner, 1982; Fuhrmann, 1987), but this study has not extended to the career development of faculty prior to entering the academic profession. Our own review of the literature uncovered a surprising lack of current information on the manner in which faculty enter the profession, with the only articles found being published between 1958 and 1973.

While studying faculty development in our own institution, and noting that the faculty at VCU fit the demographic characteristics of faculty identified by Bowen and Schuster (e.g.

primarily middle-aged, tenured senior faculty), we became interested in developing ideas for attracting promising newcomers into the profession. We discussed at length the potential for recruiting bright undergraduates for future careers as college teachers. However, we needed to know if such career decisions were made in the undergraduate years. When, for example, we began to examine our own careers, we discovered what proved to be an important insight: of the six of us brainstorming ideas around a table, only one had even considered a faculty career during his undergraduate years. This fact led us to feel a need to find out if we were typical. We decided to undertake a brief survey of VCU faculty to gain further insight that might assist us in our thinking about attracting people to an academic career. The study was therefore intended as a simple means of testing our observations about ourselves and the resulting hypotheses we generated about other faculty. (The one of us who knew prior to graduate school that he wanted to be a professor was in the humanities; the rest of us were trained in professions.)

A one-page survey was developed and sent to all 1445 full-time faculty at VCU. The questionnaire asked the faculty members to indicate their departmental and school affiliation, the point in their educational development at which they decided on a college faculty career, their age at the time of that decision, and whether the decision to pursue an academic career came before or after the decision to focus on a discipline or specialty. An optional question was "What factors played an important role in your decision to enter into the academic profession?" Because we were interested in broad answers only, we did not ask respondents

their race/ethnicity or gender.

We did not expect a large return rate for the survey. It was written and distributed in early May, during the final exam period, when many faculty may have already left for the summer, and we did not send out a follow-up request to nonrespondents. We were surprised, then, when within two weeks of mailing the survey we had received 671 usable responses for a response rate of 46%. It was only after seeing the responses and noting that of those returned, 70% chose to answer the optional open-ended question, some at length, that we realized that we may have tapped an area of considerable interest to faculty and that we had collected information that would be worth sharing with a wider audience than ourselves.

The survey was conducted at only one university, and the results should be interpreted in light of the characteristics of VCU. Virginia Commonwealth University is a 20,000 student, urban university in the heart of Richmond, Virginia. It is comprised of two campuses, about two miles apart, which were merged from two separate institutions into one university in 1968. The east campus includes the Schools of Medicine, Allied Health, Nursing, Pharmacy, Dentistry, and Basic Health Sciences, and is also known as The Medical College of Virginia. The west campus, also known as the Academic Campus, houses the College of Humanities and Sciences and the Schools of Education, Business, Community and Public Affairs, Social Work, and Arts. VCU is a major research institution with a strong history of good teaching, and both teaching and research are highly valued, both in rhetoric and in

practice. Programs and faculty developed rapidly after the 1968 merger, and the majority of the faculty were hired in the expansion period of the late sixties and early seventies. Like most other colleges and universities across the country, faculty now are primarily senior, tenured people, and most engage in both teaching and scholarly activities.

RESULTS

Response rates from the twelve units of the institution are displayed in Table 1. The overall response rate of 46% ranged from a low of 32% in the Schools of Business and the Arts to a high of 67% in the School of Nursing. Results from the College of Humanities and Sciences and the Schools of Medicine and Basic Health Sciences (the three largest schools in the university) each responded at about the institutional average.

Table 2 details the point in their educational careers at which the responding faculty made the decision to become college faculty. As was true in our group of six, the majority made the decision after completing college: 40%, the largest number, made the decision while in graduate school, and 27% made it after graduate school for a total of 67% deciding after completing undergraduate studies. Only 15% decided during their undergraduate years, with the remaining 8% deciding either in high school or between undergraduate and graduate school. Significant differences were noted by discipline. Faculty in the humanities and sciences tended to make the decision earlier in their educational careers, while those in the health sciences professions tended to make it later. Among individual schools, faculty in the fine arts made the decision earliest as a group,

while those in social work made the decision latest.

As would be expected, the age at which faculty made the decision correlated closely with the educational level at which they made the decision. Table 3 details these findings. The overall mean age at which the decision was made was 28.1 years. Faculty in the humanities and sciences and in the arts made the decision at an earlier age (24.4 and 24.7 years respectively), and those in social work and business made the decision at a later age (35.2 and 32.9 years respectively).

Overall, the vast majority of faculty responding (86%) chose their discipline or specialty before they chose to teach, with no statistical differences among faculty from the twelve schools.

The findings concerning time of decision, age of decision, and whether the decision to teach preceded or followed the choice of discipline were consistent with our hypotheses. In those disciplines or specialties that offer greater opportunity for professional practice, or which require a certain amount of experience prior to becoming academics, the decision to become a college professor comes later; in those in which a financially rewarding career outside of teaching is more problematic, the decision to teach in college is made earlier. As one English professor put it in his response to the open-ended question about motivation for a faculty career, "What else would a person who wanted to read, write, and teach about literature and language do?"

The optional, open-ended question provided the most interesting results. 70% of the respondents chose to answer the

question, "What factors played an important role in your decision to enter the academic profession?," some extensively. The responses were coded as indicated in Table 4. The most often cited reason (more than 30% of those responding to the question) was interest and/or experience in teaching. In fact, although VCU is among the top 70 research institutions in the United States, among our respondents the attraction to teaching was almost three times more prevalent than the attraction to research. Futhermore, the majority of those respondents that indicated a primary attraction to research also noted pleasure in teaching. Typical reaponses included the following:

"...a congenital desire to teach, coupled with a preference for older students." (music, age 48)

"...as part of my Ph.D. requirement, I was required to teach in the college at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. I loved it (although I was scared in the beginning). Hence the decision to become a professor, and I have not regretted it." (business, age 56)

"I took my Ph.D. as a hobby...after I completed the degree and the project, my advisor suggested that I make my degree 'acceptable for teaching' by teaching full-time for several years. I did that, and was hooked on teaching." (public administration, age 52)

"Good fortune. I had attained a level of competency in my profession and then went on to get a doctoral degree. While in the doctoral program, I had my first taste of teaching. I loved it and have stayed with it ever since." (social work, age 62)

"I like to teach, and am interested in the academic

environment. I wish my old man had been rich. I might have done it sooner." (rehabilitation counseling, age 61; entered profession at age 43)

Both long standing love of teaching and students and positive experiences actually teaching provided these faculty with the recognition that college teaching was the career for them. These findings are clearly consistent with career development literature, which emphasizes again and again that both intrinsic motivation (e.g. personality theory) and positive experiences (e.g. socialization theory) contribute significantly to career decision-making, and ultimately to carrer satisfaction (Herr and Cramer, 1979; Osipow, 1983).

Mentioned only slightly less often than interest and experience in teaching was the influence of role models such as mentors and faculty members, sometimes by name. 28% of the respondents to the questions identified this factor, frequently in combination with other factors. This finding is consistent with socialization aspects of career development. Examples from this category include:

"My father is an academician. I like to dabble in the interface between clinical science and basic science, which is possible only in academia." (psychiatry, age 36)

"Outstanding teacher--role model--coupled with graduate teaching experience." (biochemistry, age 51)

"Good role modeling teachers who enjoyed their work." (dentistry, age 40)

"Inspiring undergraduate instructors." (urban studies, age 36)

"The professors I had in college and graduate school, and the teachers in my family." (English, age 39)

"Having had a 'special' professor my junior year in college that unlocked real learning, not merely memorizing, and also one that urged me to ask the question 'why'. (art, age 36)

The third highest category of responses (21%) were of a less concrete nature. These responses indicated a belief in the fantasy of what being an academic is all about. They concerned the nature of academic life, including autonomy, academic freedom, flexibility and community:

"To serve human needs and the good of society; to work in an open environment where personal integrity and responsibility count; to be a part of a community that has a certain degree of respect and prestige." (education, age 46)

"The style of life..." (business, age 42)

"A gentlemanly career." (microbiology, age 54)

"...the many opportunities available in an academic career, not only to teach, but to consult, to continue my education, to work on varied and interesting projects with other disciplines...I follow the dictates of my own best judgment concerning what I do." (allied health, age 36)

"...the freedom to do what I wanted to do (teach and write), the flexibility of schedule, and the continuous intellectual stimulation." (education, age 41)

"The dynamics of the academic arena." (nursing, age 39)

Other influences mentioned included intellectual challenge, opportunities for research or creative endeavors, the potential for impact on the discipline, and various external factors (e.g.

availability of a job or fellowship, family considerations, reactions against other careers which had proved disappointing, and serendipity:

"Overtly: liking to read and talk about what I read and liking to think BIG thoughts....Covertly: teaching lets me, I suspect anyway, fulfill desires to 'direct' the show--it is socially acceptable bossing for those of us who are ambivalent about being in charge." (English, age 40)

"A chance encounter on an elevator...I have never regretted that day." (education, age 43)

"Entered to do research. Enjoyment from teaching was a fringe benefit." (medicine, age 53)

IMPLICATIONS

All of the findings of this study are consistent with career development theory, and provide a beginning for understanding the processes inherent in the choice of an academic career.

Three important learnings emerged from this study: a beginning understanding of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that attract faculty to academic careers, an awareness of significant disciplinary differences in decision making and socialization experiences of faculty in different specialty areas, and confirmation of the observation that the decision to enter academic life is heavily influenced by positive teaching experiences and by positive role models and mentors.

In analyzing the results of the open-ended question concerning motivation for entering academia, we noted the attraction to teaching was mentioned three times more often than

attraction to research, that role models and other mentors played an important role, and that the life style of a college teacher is a significant motivator. All three of these motivations, which accounted for 80% of the responses, need to be understood and accounted for in recruiting, understanding, and retaining high quality faculty.

Secondly, it is important to know that the time at which the decision to become a college teacher is made varies by discipline. Whereas fine arts, liberal arts, and science faculty in our sample tended to decide early in their educational development (prior to or during their undergraduate years), faculty in the professional schools made the decision much later, usually after spending some time practicing the profession for which they were trained. This finding is especially important for future work in recruiting college faculty for anticipated shortages, but it is also important to our understanding of potential differences between those faculty who elected to be college faculty early versus those who elected to be college faculty after experience in another career. Questions concerning potential differences deserve study.

Finally, this study indicates that when people are offered positive teaching experiences and are exposed to positive role models, they will consider and pursue a career in academia. The implications of this finding are clear, especially for future recruitment efforts. We need to provide potential candidates for faculty careers with appropriate role models and appropriate teaching experiences during their undergraduate and graduate school years. Training programs for graduate teaching assistants

school years. Training programs for graduate teaching assistants do more than help those assistants do a better job in their immediate assignments; they also provide a fertile training ground for the future professors of America's colleges and universities, and need to be seen in this light.

In summary, the implications of this study point to the possibility of creating an applicant pool for a potential faculty shortage. Furthermore, they support the concept that faculty development can be fully understood only when all stages of the career are considered, including those that occur prior to the beginning of the career itself. If faculty development is to be successful, practitioners must understand those motivators which lead faculty into the profession as well as the differences in decision-making demonstrated by faculty from different disciplines.

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Table 1

Response Rates to Faculty Survey
by School

School	# Responding	% of Sample	% of Faculty
Allied Health Professions	48	11	63
Arts	43	6	32
Basic Health Sciences	73	6	47
Business	41	6	32
Community and Public Affairs	22	3	52
Dentistry	41	6	58
Education	46	7	54
Humanities & Sciences	108	16	47
Medicine	171	26	47
Nursing	37	6	67
Pharmacy	20	3	56
Social Work	14	2	37
School not Given	7	1	-
TOTAL	671	100	46

Table 2

Point of Career Decision

Time of Decision	Dicipline: Humanities & Sciences	Health Professions	Other Professions	Total
High School	9	22	5	36
Undergraudate School	34	40	27	101
Between Undergrad. & Grad. School	23	35	20	78
Graduate School	39	153	74	266
Post Graduate School	8	134	38	180
TOTAL	113	384	164	661

$\chi^2 = 65.58$; $P < .001$

Table 3

Age at Career Decision

School	Mean Age
Humanities & Sciences	24.4
Arts	24.7
Basic Health Sciences	26.1
Pharmacy	27.1
Community & Public Affairs	27.9
Education	28.7
Medicine	29.1
Allied Health Professions	30.0
Nursing	30.0
Dentistry	31.0
Business	32.9
Social Work	35.2

Table 4

Factors Influencing Career Decision

	N	% Respondents*
No Response	204	
Interest and/or experience in teaching	146	31.3
Influence of role models	129	27.6
Nature of academic life	98	21.0
Intellectual stimulation	74	15.8
Opportunity, convenience	69	14.8
Research/creative oppturnities	56	12.0
Impact on profession or discipline	40	8.6
Reaction to other careers	33	7.0
Professional growth	31	6.6
No other options available	18	3.9
Other (prestige, security, salary, service)	20	4.3

*Total greater than 100% due to multiple responses.